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SUBJECT: CZECH FOREIGN MINISTER CALLS IN AMBASSADOR ON  
SENATE VISA WAIVER LEGISLATION

11. (SBU) Czech FM Cyril Svoboda called in the Ambassador on the morning of May 19 to discuss the recently approved Senate amendment to immigration reform legislation that would extend the visa waiver program (VWP) to Poland, but not to the Czech Republic. Svoboda, who faces re-election in two weeks, noted that the timing of the amendment was particularly difficult in that he had just returned from a visit to Washington, which included a meeting with Senator Lugar. Lugar had told him on May 16 that the lobbying by senior officials from Central European capitals -- including the Poles -- would have "no influence" in the question of extending the VWP. Svoboda reminded the Ambassador that he had gone out of his way in recent weeks, including in his public statements after the meetings with Lugar and Secretary Rice, to praise the United States for the balanced and engaged approach the USG is taking to extend VWP, as demonstrated by the visa roadmap. He asked the Ambassador for an explanation of what had happened.

12. (SBU) Ambassador stressed that the amendment was the initiative of individual Senators, and certainly did not represent a change in USG policy. He also noted that the fate of the amendment is uncertain, given that the full immigration bill still requires Senate approval and reconciliation with a competing House version. He also noted the statements of several officials from the region, including the Czech Ambassador in Washington, that this amendment represents an opportunity for further discussion with U.S. lawmakers.

13. (SBU) FM Svoboda expressed great frustration with the wording of the amendment, particularly that it did not address the full contribution of coalition allies to the GWOT, but only troop contributions to OIF and OEF. Svoboda noted that the CR has over 300 troops in total on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, including those serving under NATO commands (Comment: Post also notes that the USG is urging allies, including the Czechs, to move more of their forces to NATO command). When analyzed on a per capita basis, the Czech Republic -- along with other nations, particularly the Baltics -- have a larger troop contribution to the GWOT than the Poles. Further, the Czechs have contributed in many other ways, including substantial reconstruction and humanitarian assistance in Iraq and elsewhere.

14. (SBU) Svoboda did not hide the fact that the Senate action comes at a very difficult moment. Not only for him personally, given his visit to Washington this week, but for the entire government facing elections on June 2-3. But beyond the electoral concerns, Svoboda stressed that Czech public opinion is likely to interpret the Senate vote as a sign that the Czech contribution to the GWOT is not valued in Washington. Svoboda made clear that the Czech government (and he personally) would be active in putting forward a positive message and trying to correct misperceptions. But

he encouraged the Ambassador to do the same.

15. (U) Post has received numerous press inquiries about the Senate vote. There was significant press coverage on May 19, and more is expected over the weekend. Radio coverage on morning of May 19 contained some inaccuracies about the status of the Senate bill. Embassy issued a media advisory mid-day on May 19 stating that USG policy on VWP had not changed and that we remain committed to the visa roadmap process, and also clarifying the steps that still lay ahead for the immigration bill.

CABANISS